

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07

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FM AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9831

INFO AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMCONSUL BELFAST

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, UK (NI), EI

SUBJECT: SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOR PARTY (SDLP) CONFERENCE

BEGIN SUMMARY: IRELAND'S TOP NORTHERN IRELAND EXPERT DESCRIBED LAST WEEKEND'S SDLP CONFERENCE AS AN UPBEAT, SUCCESSFUL EVENT, CONTROLLED EASILY BY PARTY LEADERS. JOHN HUME HAS EMERGED AS THE NUMBER 1 LEADER. THE CONFERENCE GAVE A MANDATE TO THE LEADERSHIP TO ENTER INTO TALKS ON THE BASIS OF A POLICY DOCUMENT CALLED QUOTE FACING REALITY UNQUOTE WHICH STRESSES PARTNERSHIP RATHER THAN POWER SHARING. THE SENSITIVE SUBJECTS OF A BRITISH DECLARATION OF WITHDRAWAL, INDEPENDENCE, AND INTERIM DEVOLUTION WERE DELIBERATELY AVOIDED IN THE FORMAL DEBATE.
END SUMMARY

1. IRELAND'S TOP GOVERNMENT EXPERT ON NORTHERN IRELAND, MFA ASSISTANT SECRETARY SEAN DONLON, HAS GIVEN US AN EXTENSIVE BRIEFING ON THE ANNUAL SDLP CONFERENCE HELD AT NEWCASTLE, NORTHERN IRELAND, LAST WEEKEND. DONLON, ALONG WITH MANY OTHER PERSONS
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FROM THE SOUTH INCLUDING REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE THREE PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES IN THE REPUBLIC, ATTENDED THE CONFERENCE. IT WAS THE SIXTH ONE WHICH HE HAS ATTENDED, OF THE SEVEN CONFERENCES HELD SINCE THE SDLP WAS FOUNDED. HE DESCRIBED THE ATMOSPHERE AS EBULLIENT, OPTIMISTIC, ACTIVE, AND IT IS APPARENT TO HIM THAT THE SDLP IS IN GOOD

CONDITION. THERE WERE APPROXIMATELY 350 DELEGATES AND ABOUT 250 VISITORS AND GUESTS. THE DELEGATES REPRESENTED 120 BRANCHES. DONLON NOTICED THAT THERE WERE VERY FEW BRANCHES FROM GREATER BELFAST INDICATING TO HIM THAT THE SDLP HAD STILL SOME WAY TO GO IN ATTRACTING CATHOLIC WORKING CLASS PEOPLE. ALMOST ALL OF THE DELEGATES WERE MIDDLE CLASS SCHOOL TEACHERS, DOCTORS, LAWYERS, CHEMISTS, ETC. HE MADE THE FOLLOWING GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE CONFERENCE AS A WHOLE.

2. PARTY POLICY. THE DOCUMENT CALLED QUOTE FACING REALITY UNQUOTE, WRITTEN MOSTLY BY JOHN HUME, DID NOT CAUSE THE CONTROVERSY EXPECTED OF IT. IN FACT, APPARENTLY ONLY FOUR DELEGATES VOTED AGAINST ADOPTING IT AS BASIC POLICY FOR THE PARTY DURING THE COMING YEAR. THE MAIN OPPOSITION TO IT CAME FROM JOHN TURNLY, NORTH ANTRIM, ONE OF THE TWO PROTESTANTS IN THE PARTY. TURNLY OPPOSED IT BECAUSE HE DID NOT ASK FOR A DECLARATION OF WITHDRAWAL FROM THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT. DONLON OBSERVED THAT MOST POLITICAL COMMENTATORS HAVE MISINTERPRETED THE DOCUMENT. IT DOES NOT REPRESENT A TURNING AWAY FROM FORMER POLICY TOWARD A MORE QUOTE GREEN UNQUOTE APPROACH. DONLON HAS BEEN FOLLOWING THE SDLP CLOSELY SINCE ITS FOUNDING AND HE SEES THIS DOCUMENT AS MERELY A WELL WRITTEN STATEMENT OF NORMAL SDLP POLICY. THE DOCUMENT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ATTEMPTS TO DO AWAY WITH THE EMOTIVE PHRASE QUOTE POWER SHARING UNQUOTE AND INSTEAD REFERS TO A QUOTE PARTNERSHIP UNQUOTE BETWEEN THE TWO PARTS OF THE COMMUNITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND, A PARTNERSHIP SPECIFICALLY PROVIDED FOR IN ANY DEVOLVED GOVERNMENTAL SYSTEM WHICH MIGHT BE SET UP IN THE FUTURE.

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3. BRITISH WITHDRAWAL. THERE WERE THREE MOTIONS ON THE AGENDA CALLING FOR A BRITISH DECLARATION OF WITHDRAWAL. HOWEVER, AFTER THE QUOTE FACING REALITY UNQUOTE RESOLUTION WAS PASSED THE LEADERSHIP MOVED TO DROP THE DISCUSSION ON WITHDRAWAL BECAUSE IT IN EFFECT WOULD BE AN ALTERNATE POLICY AND POLICY HAD ALREADY BEEN DECIDED UPON. THE THREE BRANCHES WHICH HAD PROPOSED THE THREE RESOLUTIONS THEN WITHDREW THEM AND THE SUBJECT WAS NOT DISCUSSED. DONLON DISAGREES WITH THE IRISH TIMES ASSESSMENT THAT A MAJORITY WOULD HAVE VOTED FOR SUCH A RESOLUTION IF IT HAD BEEN BROUGHT TO THE FLOOR. HE ESTIMATES THAT ONLY ABOUT 40 PERCENT WOULD HAVE VOTED FOR IT IN OPPOSITION TO THE PARTY LEADERSHIP. THIS DEFT MANOEUVER DEMONSTRATES ONCE AGAIN THE STRONG AND EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN THE PARTY.

4. INDEPENDENCE. THIS SUBJECT WAS ALSO DROPPED FROM THE AGENDA WHEN A SECONDER FOR THE MOTION WAS NOT FOUND. AT LAST YEAR'S CONFERENCE THE SUBJECT OF INDEPENDENCE AS AN OPTION WAS REFERRED TO THE PARTY EXECUTIVE TO MAKE A QUOTE STUDY UNQUOTE. A QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE SUBJECT WAS THEN SENT TO ALL OF THE PARTY BRANCHES. HOWEVER, NOT ONE

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REPLY WAS RECEIVED. DONLON SAYS THAT INDEPENDENCE IS NOW GONE EFFECTIVELY FROM THE SDLP THINKING. THE SDLP MEMBERS HAVE BEEN FRIGHTENED BY THE INTEREST AND SUPPORT OF AN INDEPENDENCE OPTION BY LOYALIST PARAMILITARIES.

5. INTERIM DEVOLUTION. ALTHOUGH THIS SUBJECT WAS ALSO NOT ON THE AGENDA, THERE WAS MUCH TALK OF IT IN THE CORRIDORS. THE PARTY LEADERSHIP WAS GIVEN THE GO AHEAD TO ENTER INTO TALKS ON THIS AND ANY OTHER SUBJECT. ALTHOUGH PARTY LEADER FITT AND OTHERS APPEALED TO THE UNIONISTS TO TAKE AN QUOTE EXTRA STEP UNQUOTE, THE SDLP LEADERS ARE CAUTIONS AND NOT VERY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE OUTCOME OF ANY TALKS. THEY REALISE THAT THE LOYALISTS WOULD BE QUITE HAPPY WITH INTERIM DEVOLUTION AS A PERMANENT SETTLEMENT, BUT THE SDLP DOES NOT WANT TO

GET TRAPPED INTO QUOTE HALF-WAY HOUSE UNQUOTE.
INTERIM DEVOLUTION COULD ONLY BE ACCEPTED AS THE FIRST
STAGE OF A GENERAL OVERALL SETTLEMENT.

6. LEADERSHIP. DONLON OBSERVED THAT THE PARTY HAS
BECOME VERY MUCH THE PARTY OF JOHN HUME, WHO DOMINATED
PROCEEDINGS AT THE CONVENTION. HE NOTED THAT FOR THE
FIRST TIME SEAMUS MALLON, NOW CHAIRMAN OF PUBLIC
REPRESENTATIVES, SEEMS TO HAVE ENTERED THE INNER CIRCLE
OF LEADERS, I.E. WITH FITT, CURRIE AND HUME. THE FOUR
APPEAR TO WORK TOGETHER VERY WELL AND PADDY DEVLIN'S
GHOST DOES NOT HAUNT THEM. DONLON NOTED THAT 10 OF THE
15 PARTY EXECUTIVES ELECTED AT THE CONFERENCE ARE
PERSONS PERSONALLY AND DEEPLY LOYAL TO JOHN HUME.

7. DONLON MENTIONED THAT THE PARTY IS IN REASONABLY
GOOD FINANCIAL SHAPE. IT RAISES ABOUT HALF ITS MONEY
IN THE REPUBLIC MOSTLY FROM WEALTHY SYMPATHISERS AND
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DEPENDS ON QUOTE GENEROUS BANK OVERDRAFTS UNQUOTE AND
CONTRIBUTIONS FROM MEMBERS FOR THE BALANCE OF ITS FUNDS.
THERE ARE SOME PLANS FOR FUND RAISING ACTIVITIES IN
NEW YORK BUT THEY DO NOT SEEM TO HAVE GOTTEN OFF THE
GROUND AS YET. IT COSTS ONLY ABOUT 30 THOUSAND POUNDS
A YEAR TO RUN THE PARTY.
SHANNON

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Message Attributes

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Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
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